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Beyond the "Mucha Woman": Ornamental Invariance and Sarah Bernhardt's Cross-Gender Poster Persona, 1894-1899

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Abstract: Alphonse Mucha's recurring female figure is often treated as a unified Art Nouveau type, alternately interpreted as an erotic commodity, a decorative ideal, or an emblem of the New Woman. This article argues that the category becomes analytically unstable when it is applied to the theater posters Mucha designed for Sarah Bernhardt. Through close visual comparison of *Gismonda* (1894), *Lorenzaccio* (1896), *Médée* (1898), and *Hamlet* (1899), with *JOB* (1896) serving as a commercial countertype, the study develops the concept of ornamental invariance: a stable graphic system that preserves celebrity recognition while role, costume, narrative action, and gender change. Mucha's elongated format, architectural enclosure, shallow stage-like space, integrated typography, and repeated inscription of Bernhardt's proper name do not simply feminize the performer. They make her legible as a serial star persona across Byzantine noblewoman, male Renaissance conspirator, murderous mother, and Shakespearean prince. The cross-gender posters are therefore decisive. They reveal that visual continuity in the Bernhardt corpus belongs less to a generic feminine icon than to a named performer whose identity could contain unstable gendered roles. By contrast, *JOB* fuses an anonymous smoker with a product name, erotic pleasure, and commodity recognition. Distinguishing the named theatrical persona from the anonymous commercial type revises the gender history of Mucha's posters without presuming that visual prominence equals historical emancipation or that all viewers received the images in the same way.

Keywords: *Alphonse Mucha; Sarah Bernhardt; Art Nouveau; theater posters; cross-gender performance; celebrity; ornament; visual culture.*

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Introduction

The phrase "Mucha Woman" appears to name a recognizable person, yet it more often describes a visual formula. Abundant hair, ornamental contour, floral or mosaic framing, shallow space, and a poised female body recur so insistently across Alphonse Mucha's Parisian posters that formal repetition has frequently been mistaken for stable identity. The label is useful at the level of style because it identifies a repertory of graphic devices that became inseparable from Mucha's public reputation. It becomes less reliable, however, when it is treated as an iconographic category whose members share the same social position, narrative function, or relation to the viewer. An anonymous smoker advertising cigarette paper, an allegorical season, a named actress, and a dramatic character do not become equivalent merely because Mucha renders each through curvilinear line and decorative enclosure. The semantic difference among these figures is not incidental to the posters; it is produced by the relation among image, typography, patronage, performance, and circulation. A publishable account of gender in Mucha's work must therefore begin by separating stylistic continuity from identity continuity.

The theater posters designed for Sarah Bernhardt make that distinction unavoidable. In *Gismonda*, Bernhardt appears as a Byzantine noblewoman whose stillness condenses the dignity of a stage entrance. In *Médée*, almost the entire body disappears beneath dark drapery while the exposed eyes, bloodied dagger, and dead children locate the figure in the aftermath of violent action. More consequentially, *Lorenzaccio* and *Hamlet* present Bernhardt in male roles, yet they retain many of the formal devices commonly used to define the "Mucha Woman." If the same elongated body, enclosing arch, decorative border, and integrated lettering can frame both female and male characters, then ornament alone cannot determine the figure's gender. The repeated visual language instead stabilizes a different object of recognition: Bernhardt's serial celebrity persona. The posters ask the viewer to recognize the actress through, and not despite, radical changes of role.

This problem has been obscured by a persistent interpretive binary. One line of scholarship emphasizes the female body as a commodity and reads Art Nouveau's decorative woman as an aestheticized instrument of advertising, possession, and male spectatorship (Golovchenko, 2020; Menon, 2006; Thompson, 1971). Another line stresses the poster's participation in modern female mobility, consumer culture, smoking, and the contested figure of the New Woman (Iskin, 2003, 2007; Mitchell, 1991; Roberts, 2002). Both approaches identify important historical pressures, but each can flatten distinctions among specific images when it treats the represented woman as a preexisting social type. The Bernhardt posters do not eliminate commodification, since they advertised productions, circulated as reproducible prints, and

converted theatrical labor into a marketable image. Nor do they automatically document feminist liberation, since visual command does not prove autonomous production, emancipatory reception, or expanded rights. Their originality lies elsewhere: they expose the category of the "Mucha Woman" as a taxonomic error when applied to a named performer whose public identity depended on role transformation.

The argument developed here centers on what may be called ornamental invariance. The term designates the stable visual architecture through which a poster series sustains recognition despite major changes in represented identity. In Mucha's Bernhardt corpus, this architecture includes an unusually tall format, a single monumental body, an enclosing niche or arch, minimal perspectival recession, a carefully controlled silhouette, typography incorporated into the border, and the repeated presence of Bernhardt's name. These elements do more than decorate the actor. They form a recognition scaffold that links one theatrical role to another and converts discontinuity into seriality. Ornament is therefore not treated as a feminine essence or as a detachable embellishment. It operates as a media technology that coordinates performer, role, theater, and audience at the scale of the urban poster.

The concept of a star persona clarifies why this distinction matters. Film and celebrity studies have long treated the star image as a composite assembled across roles, publicity, criticism, photography, biography, and audience response rather than as the transparent expression of an individual's private self (Dyer, 1998; Marcus, 2019). Bernhardt's fame preceded Mucha, and a substantial literature has already reconstructed her theatrical career, entrepreneurial practice, publicity strategies, and international reach (Ockman & Silver, 2005; Roberts, 2002). The present article does not repeat that biography. It isolates a narrower visual mechanism: the way Mucha's posters preserve the legibility of the proper name "Sarah Bernhardt" while allowing the represented body to become noblewoman, assassin, mother, prince, and celebrity image in succession. The unit of analysis is consequently not Bernhardt's life but the poster's organization of recognition.

The method combines comparative visual analysis with poster history, celebrity studies, and scholarship on theatrical cross-dressing. Posters are read as designed objects in which image and word share the task of identification, an approach consistent with Iskin's account of the modern poster as an integrated visual-verbal medium adapted to rapid public viewing (Iskin, 2014). The principal corpus is limited to four Bernhardt posters produced between 1894 and 1899, while *JOB* provides a control case because the Mucha Foundation itself identifies it as paradigmatic of the iconic "Mucha woman" (Mucha Foundation, n.d.-c). This selection privileges the works that most clearly test the relation among ornament, proper name, role, and gender. It excludes a comprehensive chronology of Bernhardt's career and does not claim to reconstruct all contemporary responses. The analysis asks how the posters structure possible recognition, not how every spectator actually interpreted them.

This distinction between representational capacity and historical effect is essential. A poster can make a female performer appear authoritative, violent, contemplative, or male without proving that viewers experienced the image as politically emancipatory. Cross-gender casting could disturb gender categories, but it could also function as familiar theatrical convention and profitable spectacle (Berlanstein, 1996). Likewise, a smoking woman could signify modern independence, erotic availability, moral danger, or several of these at once (Mitchell, 1991). The article therefore avoids a simple verdict that Mucha either liberated or objectified women. Its claim is more precise: the Bernhardt posters establish a named, serial, role-variable persona that cannot be adequately described as one instance of a generic feminine type. That revision shifts the question from what the "Mucha Woman" symbolizes to how a poster makes identity persist through change.

From Feminine Icon to Named Persona

Art Nouveau's investment in the female figure remains central to the problem because Mucha did not create his posters outside the period's gendered visual economy. Thompson's foundational study described woman as an unusually dominant subject within Art Nouveau, where bodies, hair, plants, and decorative line often participate in a shared organic syntax (Thompson, 1971). Silverman situated that syntax within the political, psychological, and domestic cultures of fin-de-siècle France, demonstrating that style cannot be separated from the social formations that made it meaningful (Silverman, 1992). Menon subsequently showed how fin-de-siècle visual culture manufactured and marketed the femme fatale through repetition, circulation, and design (Menon, 2006). These studies establish that decorative femininity was not an innocent formal preference. It provided a flexible language through which modernity could imagine pleasure, danger, consumption, nature, sexuality, and social change.

The illustrated poster intensified that flexibility because it had to communicate at a distance and under conditions of distraction. Its figures needed to command the street, its lettering needed to be read quickly, and its image had to survive competition with adjacent advertisements. Iskin argues that the poster's modernity emerged in part from the integration of image and text, which allowed words to become graphic forms rather than captions appended to pictures (Iskin, 2014). Such integration is decisive in Mucha's work. A proper name may curve around a head, occupy a vertical side panel, or form part of an ornamental border; a product name may become the dominant architecture behind a face. The figure's identity consequently depends on where the name appears, how it is scaled, and what relation it establishes between body and advertised object. Typography is not secondary evidence. It is one of the poster's principal iconographic agents.

The commercial poster also addressed a public in which women increasingly appeared as consumers, urban spectators, amateur collectors, and figures of modern mobility. Iskin's studies of the flâneuse and the New Woman demonstrate that advertising images could popularize new forms of female visibility even while directing that visibility toward commercial ends (Iskin, 2003, 2007). Roberts similarly emphasizes playacting, journalism, and theatricality as practices through which fin-de-siècle women tested the apparent naturalness of gender roles (Roberts, 2002). These arguments complicate any account that equates representation with subordination. Yet they also caution against assuming that every centrally placed female body performs the same cultural work. A woman who is named, professionally recognizable, and represented in a role occupies a different semiotic position from an anonymous model whose body is aligned with a commodity.

Celebrity theory offers a vocabulary for that difference. Dyer defines the star image as an intertextual construction

distributed across many media, while Marcus emphasizes the active relations among celebrities, media producers, and publics in the formation of fame (Dyer, 1998; Marcus, 2019). In this model, a role does not erase the performer. It becomes one more text through which the star is recognized, compared, discussed, and remembered. Bernhardt's theater posters are unusually explicit instances of such intertextuality because they must advertise both a dramatic fiction and the actress whose name guarantees its public value. The poster's figure is therefore neither simply Bernhardt nor simply the character. It is a layered persona generated by the visible conjunction of actress, role, title, costume, theater, and ornamental format.

Cross-gender performance makes the layering visible because it prevents the viewer from treating sex, gender, character, and star identity as interchangeable. French stages had long accommodated actresses in male roles, and Berlanstein cautions that such travesti could be commonplace, commercially motivated, and ideologically ambiguous rather than intrinsically subversive (Berlanstein, 1996). Roberts, by contrast, stresses the capacity of theatrical role-play to expose gender as unstable and staged (Roberts, 2002). Howard's history of women performing Hamlet demonstrates that the role became a recurring site where female performers crossed gendered expectations while negotiating voice, action, authority, and cultural legitimacy (Howard, 2007). These perspectives need not be reconciled into a single judgment. Together they show why *Lorenzaccio* and *Hamlet* are analytically stronger than a generalized claim about female empowerment: the posters make gender variability visible while leaving its political meaning contested.

The present argument therefore distinguishes three representational categories that the phrase "Mucha Woman" often collapses. The first is the anonymous commercial type, whose body becomes a vehicle for a product or brand. The second is the serial allegorical type, as in decorative panels where figures personify seasons, flowers, times of day, or arts. The third is the named theatrical persona, whose visual identity depends on the relation between a proper name and a changing role. These categories can share formal devices, and one poster may activate more than one. Their differences nevertheless determine what kind of recognition the viewer is asked to perform. The crucial question is not whether the figure looks like a "Mucha Woman," but what the poster asks the figure to stand for.

Ornamental Invariance as Recognition Technology

Mucha's Bernhardt posters establish seriality through a format that is at once monumental and restrictive. Each principal figure is elongated to approximate the proportions of the narrow sheet, and each is pressed toward the picture plane rather than released into deep narrative space. The body often stands on a low platform, above a subsidiary panel, or within an architectural enclosure that resembles a niche, proscenium, reliquary, or vertical stage. The effect is paradoxical. The figure appears life-size and public, yet it is also contained by a highly controlled frame. This containment produces a form of visibility suited to celebrity: the performer is made singular, immediately recognizable, and repeatable across many sites.

The tall format also converts costume into silhouette. In *Gismonda*, patterned robes descend in an almost uninterrupted column; in *Lorenzaccio*, fitted hose, tunic, cloak, and dagger create a compact masculine profile; in *Médée*, dark cloth obscures bodily contour and concentrates attention on the eyes and hands; in *Hamlet*, cloak, sword, and helmet organize the figure as a tragic prince. Because the sheet offers limited lateral space, costume cannot function merely as historical detail. It becomes the principal means by which the role is differentiated from earlier roles. The star remains continuous, while the silhouette changes. Serial recognition depends on precisely this balance between stable frame and variable costume.

The repeated proper name provides a second level of continuity. "Sarah Bernhardt" appears as a graphic element that may curve around the head, run down the side, occupy a band, or border the figure. Its persistence solves a basic problem of role transformation: the viewer must know that the person represented as Lorenzo or Hamlet is the same celebrity represented as Gismonda or Medea. In this sense, the name performs work that facial likeness alone cannot accomplish. Mucha often idealizes, simplifies, or subordinates physiognomy to costume and pattern, and the Foundation's account of *Gismonda* explicitly notes that the poster conveys Bernhardt's stage personality rather than a realistic portrait (Mucha Foundation, n.d.-a). Typography therefore anchors identity when the body becomes theatrical material.

Ornamental invariance should not be confused with visual neutrality. The arch, halo, mosaic border, floral pattern, and decorative lettering carry associations with sanctity, luxury, historicism, exoticism, and the handcrafted surface of Art Nouveau. These associations contribute prestige to commercial print and elevate the performer above ordinary urban life. Yet their function changes according to context. A halo-like arch may monumentalize a noblewoman, frame a male assassin, or intensify the psychological isolation of a murderous mother. The same device can lend dignity to cigarette advertising. Repetition does not guarantee semantic sameness; it creates a recognizable grammar whose meaning is specified by the named role and its narrative attributes.

The term recognition technology is useful because it emphasizes operation rather than intention. It does not require proof that Mucha or Bernhardt articulated a theory of serial identity. It identifies what the graphic system enables: rapid recognition across heterogeneous images, scalable reproduction, linkage among theater, performer, and title, and the conversion of stage temporality into a durable visual sign. A theatrical performance disappears as it occurs, but the poster extracts a role-image that can circulate before, during, and after the production. When several posters are encountered together, their shared architecture turns Bernhardt's transformations into a coherent series. The ornamental system thus manages difference rather than erasing it.

Gismonda and the Construction of Serial Recognition

Gismonda **(Figure 1)** supplied the initial structure from which the later Bernhardt posters could depart. Produced for the Théâtre de la Renaissance production that opened in January 1895, the poster presents Bernhardt as the Byzantine noblewoman of Victorien Sardou's play, dressed in the costume of the final act and holding a palm branch (Mucha Foundation, n.d.-a; see Figure 1). The extraordinary height of the sheet, more than two meters, makes the figure approximate an embodied theatrical presence while keeping her remote from ordinary street scale. She does not stride, gesture broadly, or address another character. She stands. That

stillness is not passivity; it is a carefully staged suspension that allows the public body to become a sign.

Figure 1 Alphonse Mucha, *Gismonda*, 1894, color lithograph, 216 x 74.2 cm. Public domain.

The poster's most important feature is the relation among body, arch, and name. Bernhardt's floral headdress occupies the center of a circular mosaic form, while the letters of her name curve around the same zone. The result resembles a halo without fully becoming one. Sanctity, celebrity, ornament, and typography converge around the head, turning the proper name into a radiant frame. Because the title *Gismonda* occupies the top band and the theater name anchors the bottom, the body stands between dramatic fiction and institutional venue. Bernhardt's name mediates that vertical sequence. The poster thus reads downward as title, star, role-body, and theater, but these components are also fused into a single ornamental monument.

The face is comparatively small and does not carry the entire burden of identification. Mucha's profile suppresses direct eye contact, and the pale features are partially absorbed by the floral crown and golden surface. The body's patterned robes do more than display costume. They extend the decorative field through the figure, making Bernhardt both person and surface. The palm branch provides a strong countervertical, while the robe's train breaks the rigid column near the floor and creates a final zone of controlled movement. The figure is therefore recognizable not through portrait realism but through the coordinated arrangement of attributes, name, silhouette, and scale.

This distinction helps explain why *Gismonda* became generative for the series. The poster does not need to preserve Bernhardt's ordinary appearance because it establishes a transferable identity structure. The viewer learns to recognize a monumental figure enclosed within ornamental architecture, accompanied by an integrated proper name, and presented as the visual equivalent of a stage event. Later posters can change hair, costume, gesture, role, and even gender while retaining that scaffold. The first image in the series is consequently less a definitive portrait than a protocol for future transformation. It creates continuity prospectively.

The poster also demonstrates why the category "Mucha Woman" is both tempting and insufficient. Bernhardt's elongated body, elaborate dress, decorative surround, and aura-like framing contribute to the features later generalized as Mucha's feminine style. Yet the poster's proper nouns resist anonymity. The title names a role, the curved lettering names the actress, and the lower band names the theater. The figure is embedded in a specific network of theatrical production rather than presented as a free-floating ideal of femininity. What appears to be a feminine icon is already a layered media object whose identity depends on institutional and textual coordinates.

The fact that Bernhardt reused the design for an American tour further underscores this portability (Mucha Foundation, n.d.-a). The poster could detach from its initial Parisian moment and continue to signify the actress across geographical contexts. Such reuse does not merely testify to popularity. It confirms that the design had become a transferable vehicle of celebrity recognition. The ornamental system was capable of carrying the star beyond the local performance that first generated it. This portability forms the historical basis for the later series, in which role variation expands rather than disrupts the recognizable persona.

Lorenzaccio and Cross-Gender Legibility

Lorenzaccio **(Figure 2)** offers the clearest test of the argument because it places Bernhardt in a male role without abandoning the established poster architecture. The 1896 lithograph advertises Alfred de Musset's tragedy with Bernhardt as Lorenzo de' Medici, the conspirator who kills the tyrant Alessandro de' Medici. Mucha represents the political conflict through a dragon associated with the tyrant and a dagger that pierces the creature at the bottom of the poster (Mucha Foundation, n.d.-d; see Figure 2). The narrative is therefore distributed vertically: threat occupies the upper field, contemplation fills the center, and anticipated violence appears below. Bernhardt's body links these symbolic zones.

Figure 2 Alphonse Mucha, *Lorenzaccio*, 1896, color lithograph, 203.7 x 76 cm. Public domain.

The costume decisively interrupts the usual shorthand of the "Mucha Woman." Short dark hair replaces the abundant tresses of the commercial type. A fitted tunic and hose articulate the legs rather than dissolving the body beneath diaphanous fabric. A cloak adds volume without feminizing the silhouette, while the dagger at the belt identifies both role and action. The figure's hand rises toward the mouth in a gesture of inward calculation, and the other arm secures a book or paper against the torso. This is not the relaxed sensuality of *JOB*. It is an image of arrested decision in which thought precedes assassination.

Yet the poster remains unmistakably continuous with *Gismonda*. The body is full length, frontal or nearly frontal, and contained within a narrow architectural field. Decorative pattern surrounds rather than recedes behind the actor. The title occupies a commanding upper band, the theater is named below, and "Sarah Bernhardt" runs vertically along the side. The same basic recognition scaffold persists even as the represented gender changes. Visual continuity therefore belongs to the star-image system, not to a stable feminine body.

The placement of Bernhardt's name is especially important. It does not hide the cross-gender casting; it announces it. The viewer reads "Sarah Bernhardt" adjacent to a body coded through costume, hair, hose, dagger, and role title as male. The proper name and the role do not cancel each other. Their conjunction creates the publicity value of the image. Bernhardt's identity is made capacious enough to contain Lorenzo, while Lorenzo becomes legible through the celebrity's already established name. This reciprocal conversion is the essence of the serial theatrical persona.

The poster consequently separates at least four levels of identity that the generic "Mucha Woman" collapses. Bernhardt is a historical performer; the printed name is a celebrity sign; Lorenzo is a male dramatic character; and the pictured body is an ornamental construction adapted to the poster's format. None of these levels can be reduced to another. The historical performer does not cease to be a woman, the character does not cease to be male, and the image does not become a transparent record of stage appearance. Mucha's design keeps all four levels visible by refusing to resolve them into a single naturalized identity.

This layering is consistent with Butler's account of gender as constituted through repeated acts rather than guaranteed by an interior essence, but the poster also demonstrates the limits of applying performativity as a simple emancipatory verdict (Butler, 1990). Bernhardt's male role may expose gender as stylized and repeatable, yet the production remained a commercial spectacle, and cross-dressed acting had a long, familiar history on the French stage (Berlanstein, 1996). The analytical gain lies not in declaring the image radical by definition. It lies in observing that gender becomes role-dependent within a poster system commonly described as inherently feminine. The same ornament that appears to naturalize femininity elsewhere proves capable of stabilizing a male character.

The dragon and dagger reinforce this role dependence. They externalize Lorenzo's political narrative and prevent the body from functioning as a purely decorative surface. The dragon rises above and behind the figure, while the dagger motif below anticipates the act that defines the character. Bernhardt's contemplative pose occupies the interval between threat and deed. In narrative terms, the poster grants the represented figure intention, conflict, and anticipated action. This form of agency is iconographic rather than biographical, but it distinguishes the image from advertisements in which a woman's gesture primarily activates a product.

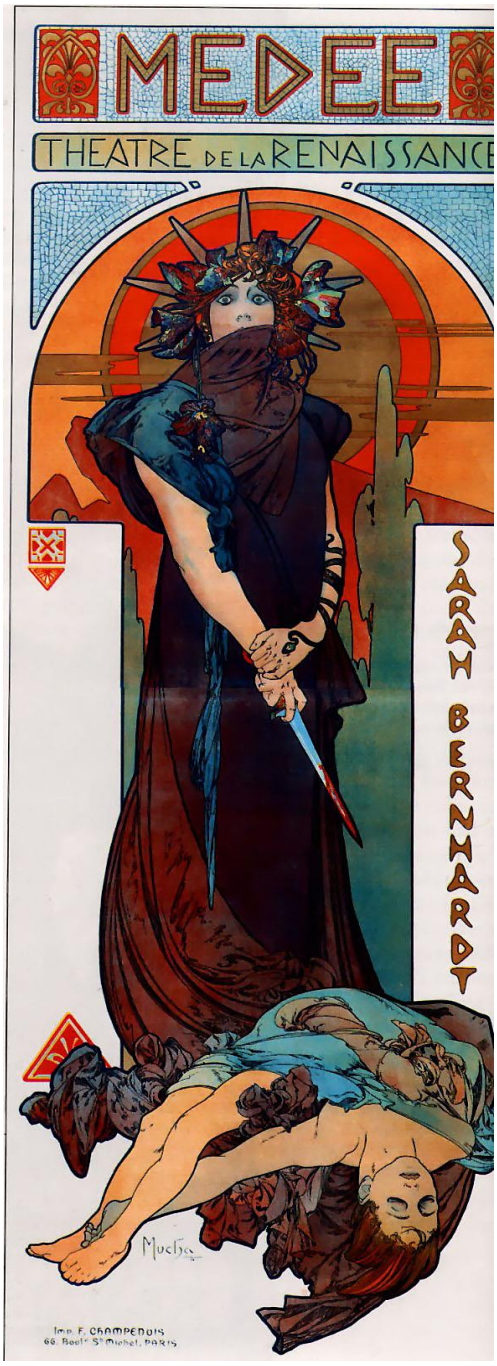
Lorenzaccio therefore reveals the deepest problem with the singular "Mucha Woman." The label assumes that repeated style identifies repeated gender, while the poster shows that repeated style can instead identify repeated celebrity. Bernhardt remains recognizable not because she is rendered through fixed feminine attributes, but because the poster coordinates proper name, format, silhouette, and role within a serial system. Cross-gender performance does not interrupt the system. It proves what the system was designed to accommodate: difference made coherent through ornament.

Médée, Concealment, and Tragic Agency

If *Lorenzaccio* tests the gender of the Bernhardt persona, *Médée* **(Figure 3)** tests the relation between visibility and agency. Mucha's 1898 poster represents the moment after Medea has killed her children, with the dead bodies collapsed at the figure's feet and

a bloodied dagger held before her (Mucha Foundation, n.d.-e; see Figure 3). The role is female, but the body is less available to the viewer than in almost any paradigmatic image of the "Mucha Woman." Dark cloth covers the torso, legs, neck, and lower face. Only the eyes, forearms, and hands emerge clearly. Agency is concentrated precisely where bodily display is withdrawn.

Figure 3 Alphonse Mucha, *Médée*, 1898, color lithograph, 206 x 76 cm. Public domain.



The eyes dominate because the veil-like drapery redirects every contour toward them. They are widened, frontal, and psychologically charged, yet the expression resists a stable emotional label. Horror, resolve, shock, grief, and estrangement remain simultaneously possible. The dagger provides material evidence of action, while the corpses supply its consequence. Mucha does not need to narrate the murder itself. He condenses the tragedy into the interval between completed violence and dawning recognition, using the face as a site where incompatible states meet.

The vertical format intensifies that condensation. The title and theater occupy a mosaic-like frieze at the top, a circular sun or disk frames Medea's head, and Bernhardt's name descends through a side panel. Below, the children's bodies break the rigid upright of the protagonist and spill across the base. The poster therefore opposes Medea's severe verticality to the horizontal collapse of the dead. This compositional contrast communicates power and cost at once. The figure stands, but the scene beneath her makes triumph impossible.

Mucha's ornament does not soften the violence. The circular background, stylized landscape, patterned border, and headdress sharpen the sense that Medea has become an iconic tragic image rather than an ordinary woman in a naturalistic setting. Menon's analysis of the marketed femme fatale is relevant because fin-de-siècle culture repeatedly converted dangerous women into consumable visual types (Menon, 2006). Yet *Médée* does not reduce easily to erotic danger. The covered body, the absence of a seductive address, the explicit dead children, and the role-specific dagger resist the pleasurable indeterminacy often associated with the femme fatale. The poster markets tragedy through Bernhardt's intensity, but it does so by foregrounding action and consequence rather than bodily availability.

The proper name again controls the relation between role and performer. "Sarah Bernhardt" appears vertically, parallel to the body, while *Médée* occupies the upper title band. The two names define distinct but connected identities. The character explains the dagger, corpses, veil, and expression; the actress explains why this particular embodiment warrants monumental display. The viewer does not encounter an anonymous murderous woman. The viewer encounters Bernhardt as Medea, a formulation in which the preposition "as" is visually built into the poster's division of title, name, and body.

The snake bracelet adds a further layer because it migrated from graphic invention into jewelry associated with the performance. The Mucha Foundation identifies the bracelet shown on Medea's arm as the prototype for a piece commissioned by Bernhardt from Georges Fouquet (Mucha Foundation, n.d.-e). This movement from poster image to wearable object demonstrates that the celebrity persona circulated across media rather than remaining confined to paper. Ornament became costume, publicity became material culture, and the role-image returned to the performing body. Such exchange complicates any account in which Mucha simply imposes a decorative feminine type on a passive model. The poster participates in a collaborative and transmedial system, even if the precise balance of authorship cannot be fully reconstructed from the image alone.

Médée thus clarifies the article's use of contested visual agency. The poster grants the figure narrative agency because she has acted, compositional agency because every element turns toward her, and celebrity agency because Bernhardt's name organizes the advertisement. At the same time, the image commodifies the role, aestheticizes violence, and circulates through a commercial print economy. These conditions are not mutually exclusive. The poster's significance resides in their coexistence. It produces a powerful female tragic persona without supplying evidence that such power escaped the structures of spectacle and exchange.

Hamlet and the Gendered Threshold of the Star Image

Hamlet **(Figure 4),** produced in 1899, returns to a male role and makes the layered structure of Bernhardt's poster persona still more explicit. The Mucha Foundation identifies the drowned Ophelia in the lower panel and the ghost of Hamlet's father in the background, noting that this was Mucha's final poster for Bernhardt (Mucha Foundation, n.d.-b; see Figure 4). Unlike *Lorenzaccio*, where political symbols surround a largely isolated protagonist, *Hamlet* compresses several characters and temporal registers into one vertical sheet. The living prince occupies the center, the paternal ghost appears behind and above, and the dead Ophelia lies below. Bernhardt's body becomes the threshold among memory, action, and death.

Figure 4 Alphonse Mucha, *Hamlet*, 1899, color lithograph, 207.5 x 76.5 cm. Public domain.

The central figure is coded as male through short hair, helmet, sword, tunic, and fur-edged cloak. The profile is sharper and more linear than the softened commercial face of *JOB*, and the body turns inward rather than offering itself to the viewer. One hand holds the sword, while the other draws the cloak across the torso. These gestures produce guardedness and concentration. The figure's authority derives from role attributes and psychic burden rather than from exposed beauty.

At the same time, the poster does not suppress Bernhardt's celebrity recognition. The upper band names the tragedy and the prince, while the lower band names the theater. Most importantly, "Sarah Bernhardt" remains visually present within the composition. The poster depends on the viewer's capacity to hold two propositions together: this is Hamlet, and this is Bernhardt. The two are neither identical nor separable. Celebrity emerges from the productive tension between them.

Ophelia's placement intensifies that tension. She lies horizontally in a narrow lower panel, decorated with flowers and visually enclosed like a body in a coffin. Above her stands a woman performing the male protagonist. The sheet therefore contains two differently gendered theatrical positions: Bernhardt's active or contemplative prince and Ophelia's feminized corpse. This arrangement does not simply invert gender hierarchy, since Hamlet remains trapped by indecision and death, while Ophelia's body contributes to the poster's aesthetic appeal. It does, however, prevent the viewer from assigning femininity to the ornamental frame as a whole. Ornament contains both male role and female death, and its meaning emerges from their dramatic relation.

Howard's history of women as Hamlet is useful here because it treats the role as a recurring test of gendered authority, subjectivity, and action (Howard, 2007). Bernhardt's performance participates in that tradition, but the poster adds a specifically graphic problem. A stage spectator encounters a female performer sustaining a male role over time; a poster viewer encounters a fixed image that must communicate the cross-gender casting at once. Mucha solves the problem through redundant signs: costume and sword identify the prince, Bernhardt's name identifies the star, and the recurring vertical architecture links the image to the established series. The poster does not ask the face alone to bear the contradiction.

The ghost further complicates the organization of identity. Its enlarged profile emerges from the background like a memory or projection, visually echoing the central head while belonging to another character and another ontological register. The relation between the two profiles creates an internal doubling. Hamlet is haunted by a father, while Bernhardt's star image is haunted by its earlier roles. Each new poster carries the memory of the previous ones because the ornamental system invites comparison. The series becomes cumulative, and recognition depends on that accumulation.

This cumulative structure explains why the final Bernhardt poster can be read as a culmination rather than a departure. *Hamlet* retains the tall sheet, the monumental single figure, the integrated lettering, the symbolic background, and the subsidiary narrative panel. It also brings the cross-gender logic to its most culturally charged role. Bernhardt's star persona now contains one of the canonical male parts of European theater without ceasing to function as a recognizable commercial image. The poster's achievement is not that it makes gender disappear. It makes gender one variable within a larger serial identity.

Seen in relation to *Gismonda*, *Hamlet* demonstrates the full range of ornamental invariance. The Byzantine noblewoman and Danish prince share no stable costume, hair, gesture, narrative, or gender. What persists is the graphic apparatus that coordinates name, body, role, and institution. The series thereby produces a form of identity that is neither purely bodily nor purely textual. Bernhardt is recognizable as the pattern of transformation itself.

JOB and the Ontology of the Proper Name

The contrast with *JOB* **(Figure 5)** clarifies what is distinctive about the Bernhardt corpus. Mucha's 1896 advertisement for Joseph Bardou cigarette paper presents an

anonymous woman in profile, eyes nearly closed, head tilted backward, and cigarette poised near the mouth. Her abundant hair fills much of the field, while smoke threads through its curves and the large letters J-O-B occupy the background. A mosaic-inspired border lends the image a dignity associated with Mucha's theater posters (Mucha Foundation, n.d.-c; see Figure 5). Many of the formal ingredients of the "Mucha Woman" are therefore present in concentrated form.

Figure 5 Alphonse Mucha, *JOB*, 1896, color lithograph, 66.7 x 46.4 cm. Public domain.

The figure's anonymity is not an absence of meaning. It is the condition that allows her body to merge with the product's identity. Hair, smoke, lettering, hand, and cigarette form a continuous arabesque, and the product name becomes the largest textual element in the composition. Where the Bernhardt posters place a proper name beside a role title, *JOB* substitutes a brand. The woman does not stand as a performer who can move from one character to another. She functions as the sensuous personification of consumption.

This difference can be stated as an ontology of the proper name. In the theater posters, "Sarah Bernhardt" identifies a historical and reproducible celebrity persona whose continuity exceeds any single role. *Gismonda*, *Lorenzaccio*, *Médée*, and *Hamlet* identify temporary dramatic identities that the persona inhabits. In *JOB*, by contrast, the only dominant name belongs to the commodity. The woman's identity is not withheld so that spectators might discover a private individual behind the image. It is structurally unnecessary because the advertisement needs a

pleasurable relation between body and product, not a serial relation between performer and role.

The image has consequently generated opposed interpretations. Golovchenko reads the female body as commodified through its function in advertising, while Mitchell's broader study of women smoking emphasizes how the cigarette could mark female modernity, autonomy, and transgression (Golovchenko, 2020; Mitchell, 1991). Mucha's poster can sustain elements of both readings. The smoker appears self-absorbed rather than solicitous, and the cigarette is held for her own pleasure; yet the composition converts that pleasure into brand value and invites the viewer to consume the image with the product. The poster's ambiguity should not be resolved by declaring the figure either empowered or oppressed. It should be analyzed as a designed relation among anonymity, eroticism, commodity, and modern gesture.

Comparing *JOB* with *Lorenzaccio* and *Hamlet* makes the stakes clearer. All three images use ornamental enclosure and a dominant single body. In *JOB*, the body activates a commodity name; in the cross-gender theater posters, the body mediates between a celebrity name and a dramatic role. The commercial smoker's hair and smoke dissolve boundaries, whereas the theatrical costumes specify character, action, and narrative. The smoker is available for typological repetition because she has no

named biography within the poster. Bernhardt is available for serial transformation because her proper name guarantees continuity across difference.

The scale and format reinforce the distinction. *JOB* is substantially smaller and more compact than the towering Bernhardt sheets. Its bust-length figure creates intimacy, bringing face, hand, cigarette, and hair close to the viewer. The theater posters approximate standing bodies and architectural façades, projecting celebrity into public space at a monumental scale. Both formats are commercial, but they solicit different modes of attention. *JOB* offers sensuous proximity; the Bernhardt posters stage public apparition.

The comparison also demonstrates why formal resemblance cannot carry the entire interpretive burden. The Byzantine mosaic border, curving line, and idealized face appear in both advertising and theatrical work, but their semantic function changes with the relation between name and body. Ornament dignifies the cigarette poster and integrates the commodity into a luxurious visual field. In the Bernhardt series, ornament stabilizes a named persona across role changes, including cross-gender roles. The same style serves different representational ontologies. A rigorous account must identify those differences before assigning political meaning.

JOB should therefore remain within the argument, but as a countertype rather than as the definitive key to all of Mucha's women. It demonstrates how the anonymous commercial figure can become iconic precisely because she is detached from a singular identity. The Bernhardt posters demonstrate the opposite process: a singular proper name becomes iconic by accumulating heterogeneous roles. The two systems intersect visually, yet they organize recognition in fundamentally different ways.

Conclusion: From Type to Transformative Persona

The Bernhardt posters require a revision of one of the most familiar categories in Mucha scholarship. "Mucha Woman" accurately describes a style-based family resemblance, but it becomes misleading when it is used as though every female-presenting figure shared the same identity, gender logic, or relation to commerce. *Gismonda*, *Lorenzaccio*, *Médée*, and *Hamlet* constitute a serial system in which the proper name Sarah Bernhardt persists while costume, narrative, affect, and gender change. Their continuity is ornamental, typographic, institutional, and celebrity-based. It is not the continuity of a generic feminine essence.

Ornamental invariance names the mechanism that makes this seriality possible. The elongated sheet, architectural enclosure, shallow stage-like space, monumental silhouette, integrated title bands, and repeated proper name form a recognition technology. These devices transform ephemeral performance into portable public identity. They also make the cross-gender posters legible without requiring the viewer to choose between Bernhardt and the male character. The poster presents celebrity as a layered relation, and that relation can accommodate contradiction.

The cross-gender works provide the article's strongest evidence because they detach Art Nouveau ornament from any automatic equation with femininity. *Lorenzaccio* and *Hamlet* retain the visual grammar often used to define the "Mucha Woman," yet they organize male roles through short hair, fitted costume, weapons, inward gesture, and narrative attributes. Their existence does not prove that theatrical travesti was politically radical or that contemporary spectators abandoned binary gender categories. It does prove that the poster series locates continuity somewhere other than the represented character's gender. Bernhardt's star persona remains stable because it is structured as the capacity to transform.

Médée extends this insight by showing that female theatrical identity need not depend on erotic exposure. Bodily concealment, violent action, psychological intensity, and the visual consequence of the dead children produce a tragic persona whose authority is role-specific and morally unresolved. *Gismonda* establishes the original monumentality from which these later transformations proceed. Together, the posters demonstrate that Mucha's ornament can sanctify, historicize, masculinize, conceal, or dramatize according to the demands of role and publicity. Its repetition is functional rather than semantically fixed.

JOB confirms the need for categorical precision. Its anonymous smoker is visually commanding, but the product name supplies the poster's dominant identity and the body is woven into a circuit of erotic pleasure and commodity recognition. The Bernhardt posters instead advertise a performer-role relation. This distinction does not place theater outside commerce, nor does it absolve the celebrity image from commodification. It identifies different structures within commercial visual culture: anonymous typification on one side, named serial personification on the other.

The argument also sets limits on claims about agency. Compositional centrality, narrative action, and a conspicuous proper name can create visual authority, but they do not by themselves establish contractual control, feminist intention, or emancipatory reception. Those questions require archival evidence from correspondence, contracts, reviews, sales, collecting practices, and audience testimony. The posters nevertheless provide evidence about the representational options available within mass print. They show a female celebrity publicly pictured as noblewoman, assassin, murderous mother, and prince through a coherent graphic identity.

Replacing the singular "Mucha Woman" with a more differentiated taxonomy opens a broader research program. Anonymous commercial types, serial allegories, named actresses, and role-specific theatrical personae can be compared without assuming that shared ornament produces shared meaning. Such distinctions may also clarify other poster cultures in which celebrity, product, and gender overlap. For Mucha, the immediate consequence is clear. Bernhardt was not merely the model from whom the "Mucha Woman" emerged. Within the theater posters, she became the named principle that allowed the image to change.

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